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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000786

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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GERMAN AND FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTERS  
REAFFIRM SUPPORT FOR LEBANON, BUT LEBANESE REACTION MUTED

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese reaction to German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's July 7 visit to Beirut, followed by a July 10-11 visit by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was muted. Lebanese contacts asserted that while the show of support was appreciated, the visits amounted to little more than public relations events for the Europeans. Both Steinmeier and Kouchner made statements in support of Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and encouraged a quick government formation. However, each also adamantly asserted that Lebanon's government formation was strictly an "internal Lebanese affair." As long as security and stability are present, the Lebanese public appears unconcerned by the slow pace of government formation. The European ministers each met with President Michel Sleiman, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri. French FM Kouchner held additional meetings with members of the majority March 14 coalition and opposition parliamentarians and political leaders, including members of Hizballah. End summary.

EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS

2. (C) German Deputy Head of Mission in Beirut Irene Plank reported that FM Steinmeier's overwhelming impression was that the general atmosphere between Lebanon's political leaders was "constructive and pragmatic." President Sleiman and Hariri were clear about the need to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions, as the only means to maintain sovereignty and independence, she said. Furthermore, Plank added, Germany assessed that Syria's relative lack of interference in Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections and recent Saudi-Syrian rapprochement were contributing to Lebanon's "positive atmosphere." Hariri raised the issue of the hold on the transfer of 43 German Leopard tanks for the Lebanese Armed Forces, but there has been no progress in lifting the hold to allow the EU to transfer the tanks, Plank confirmed.

13. (C) Remy Bouallegue, Political Officer at the French Embassy in Beirut, confirmed to Poloff July 14 that the purpose of FM Kouchner's visit to Beirut was to show continued support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, in a "relaxed" way. According to Bouallegue, Kouchner believed that the Hizballah-led March 8 opposition was "bluffing" in its demands for the "blocking third" veto, however, March 8 maintained its insistence that the cabinet should be fully representative of Lebanon's various sectarian communities. Hizballah representatives, in particular, advised Kouchner that they would consider a strictly March 14 cabinet unconstitutional because March 14 could not represent the Shia constituency, Bouallegue said.

#### LEBANESE REACTION

14. (C) Advisor to President Sleiman, Naji Abi Assi, told the Ambassador July 13 that neither Steinmeier's nor Kouchner's visit included much substance, in his view. Steinmeier, he said, was in listening mode and began his meeting with Sleiman by telling Sleiman that he was running for re-election in Germany. Kouchner, Abi Assi claimed, brought no new messages from French President Sarkozy, and much of the discussion focused on the need for Lebanon and Syria to maintain good relations with each other.

15. (C) Despite the significant press coverage both European visits received, Lebanese political contacts supportive of both March 14 and opposition Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri characterized the visits as "empty." They have accused

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Steinmeier of visiting Lebanon as one strategy to boost his media coverage before Germany's parliamentary elections in September. Kouchner's visit, they claimed, also was for "public relations" and included nothing new. Kouchner's press statements, especially following his meeting with Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun, included several comments highlighting the French decision to include meetings with opposition figures (including Aoun and Hizballah ministers) because "(they) took part in the elections just like other Lebanese groups," he commented.

#### COMMENT

16. (C) While the visits reaffirmed European support for Lebanon's state institutions and Hariri's task to form a government, public reaction was muted. Political contacts appear to be waiting for "instructions" from outside governments, including the United States, France and Germany, to push the government formation process forward. Meanwhile, the number one priority, say our contacts in the business community, is to keep businesses growing; projections suggest significant sales growth due to increased tourism this summer to Lebanon (septel). The prevailing consensus appears to be that the slow pace of government formation is less of a concern as long as security and stability are present. End comment.

SISON